

CZECH REPUBLIC 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government continued to provide tax benefits and financial support to registered religious groups. Members of both registered and nonregistered religious groups were free to worship without government interference. The government started implementing the Church Restitution Act, designed to resolve long-standing religious communal property restitution claims.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Acts and expressions of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment included vandalism of Jewish property and opposition by extreme right wing movements to the opening of new mosques.

The U.S. embassy monitored the efforts of the government and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims. Embassy officials conducted outreach to religious groups, including Roman Catholic and Protestant groups, the Jewish and Muslim communities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The embassy supported the Office of the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues at the Department of State in capacity building with the European Shoah Legacy Institute (ESLI), and focused on outstanding Holocaust era restitution cases.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.2 million (July 2013 estimate). The population is largely homogeneous with a dominant Christian tradition. The 2011 census indicates 2.2 million people hold religious beliefs. Approximately 11 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 7 percent lists no specific religion, and 3 percent adheres to a variety of religious beliefs, including Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. Of the remainder, 4.6 million did not respond, and 3.6 million indicated they held no religious beliefs. There are approximately 3,500 persons officially registered as members of the Jewish community, although academics estimate there are approximately 10,000 Jews and the Federation of Jewish Communities estimates there are 15,000 to 20,000. Leaders of the local Muslim community estimate there are 10,000 Muslims, most of whom are immigrants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

The Department of Churches in the Ministry of Culture (MOC) is responsible for religious affairs. All religious groups registering with the MOC are eligible to receive tax benefits. The law establishes a two-tiered system of registration for religious groups. To register at the first (lower) tier, a religious group must have at least 300 adult members permanently residing in the country. First-tier registration confers limited tax benefits, establishes annual reporting requirements, and requires a 10-year waiting period before a group may apply for full second-tier registration.

For second-tier registration, entitling a group to government subsidies, the group must have membership equal to at least 0.1 percent of the population, or approximately 10,200 persons, and provide that number of signatures as proof. Some religious groups decline to receive state financial support as a matter of principle and an expression of independence.

There are 36 state-recognized religious groups. Only clergy of registered second-tier religious groups may perform officially recognized marriage ceremonies and serve as chaplains in the military and at prisons. Prisoners who belong to other religious groups may receive visits from their own clergy. Religious groups registered prior to 2002 are exempt from requirements for second-tier registration, such as minimum membership requirements. Although unregistered religious groups may not legally own community property, they often form civic interest associations to manage their property until they can meet the registration qualifications. The government permits this type of interim solution. Unregistered religious groups are free to assemble and worship.

The penal code contains provisions regarding hate crimes. It outlaws Holocaust denial and provides for prison sentences of six months to three years for public denial, questioning, approval of, or attempts to justify the Nazi genocide. The law also outlaws the incitement of hatred based on religion and provides for prison sentences of up to three years. The law designates January 27 as Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Missionaries must obtain long-term residence and work permits to remain longer than 90 days. There is no special visa category for religious workers; foreign missionaries and clergy are required to meet the conditions for a standard work permit.

The Act on Church Restitution, which the government began implementing in January, authorizes the government to return lands worth 75 billion crowns (CZK) (\$3.9 billion) and pay CZK 59 billion (\$3 billion) in financial restitution for lands that cannot be returned, to be paid over 30 years, to 16 separate religious institutions. Because the law was based on an agreement between the government and the churches, religious organizations have not complained about its application. The law allocates slightly more than 79 percent of the financial compensation to the Roman Catholic Church, and contains provisions for phasing out direct state support to religious groups over a 17-year period. The law stipulated that claims for the return of property had to be filed by December 31.

The MOC permits nine of the 36 registered religious groups to teach religion in state schools. Although religious instruction is optional in public schools, school directors must introduce religious education choices if seven or more students of the same religious group in a class request such instruction.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, formerly the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

Government Practices

The government continued to provide financial support to religious groups with second-tier registration and to sponsor religiously oriented cultural activities.

Religious groups received approximately CZK 3.4 billion (\$174.7 million) from the government. The government paid approximately CZK 1.4 billion (\$72 million) as a contribution to 17 religious groups with second-tier registration and CZK 2 billion (\$102.8 million) as part of compensation for communal property in state hands that would not be returned to churches. While accepting the state contribution, the Baptist Union opted not to accept the compensation. The MOC provided CZK 2.2 million (\$113,000) in grants for religiously oriented cultural activities.

The Hussite Church of Jan Zizka of Trocnov filed an application for first-tier registration in September that remained pending at year's end. The church had originally filed in 2010 under the name of the Hussite Church and again, under the same name, in November 2011. The last application was rejected by the government in November 2012.

Also pending at the MOC were applications from the Ukrainian Orthodox Greek-Catholic Church, Christian Church of Free Friars, and Order of the Guardians of the Crown and Sword of the Iron and Golden King. The government registered the Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator in March, the Salvation Army in September, and the New Life Church in October. The MOC suspended the registration application of the religious association Unity of St. Kliment because the church failed to respond to the ministry's request for additional information.

The government continued to address religious communal property restitution problems. Jewish claims dated to the period of the Nazi occupation during World War II, while Roman Catholic authorities and other religious groups pressed claims for properties seized during the communist era. Although the government had returned most Roman Catholic churches, parishes, and monasteries in the 1990s, most land and forests had remained in state possession.

Based on the new Act on Church Restitution, the Brno Jewish Community re-applied for a property in the possession of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs that was the subject of a previous court proceeding. The government had previously returned nearly all of the state-owned properties the Federation of Jewish Communities claimed.

The Ministry of Interior continued to counter right-wing groups espousing anti-Semitic views by monitoring their activities, increasing cooperation with police from neighboring countries, shutting down unauthorized rallies, and pursuing Holocaust-denial investigations and prosecutions.

In April, Deputy Chairman of the Senate Premysl Sobotka and Lord Mayor of Prague Bohuslav Svoboda sponsored and participated in an annual march against anti-Semitism.

In May, the government approved the 2013 Concept to Fight Extremism, which stressed the importance of implementing preventive measures, including specialized training for teachers and police. The concept paper included recommendations for the Ministry of Education on training educators how to teach

students about the Holocaust and ensuring that texts were free of anti-Semitic and other extremist views.

In July, Czech police charged two men over the publication of a book of selected speeches of Adolf Hitler. The trial for these men remained pending at year's end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, in particular reflecting anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiments.

A small but persistent and organized extreme right movement included neo-Nazi groups with anti-Semitic views. Other elements of the population, including some small nationalist groups and certain Islamic groups, also continued to make anti-Semitic statements.

The activities of groups such as National Resistance and Autonomous Nationalists included public gatherings and Internet blogs, and were characterized by anti-Muslim sentiments, anti-Semitic attitudes, Holocaust denial, and the dissemination of Nazi propaganda. Activities of anti-Semitic bloggers increased following the presidential elections in January, according to the Federation of Jewish Communities.

In May, Prague Jewish Community released a study noting anti-Semitic attacks on the Internet had increased, although there were no physical attacks or direct threats against Jews in 2012.

The private Endowment Fund for Holocaust Victims, which had received CZK 300 million (\$15.4 million) from the state in 2001, continued to support the preservation of communal property, educational programs, and community welfare. The fund contributed CZK 4.5 million (\$ 231,000) to 16 institutions providing health and social care for approximately 600 Holocaust survivors.

Leaders of the small Muslim communities in Hradec Kralove and Brno that had faced opposition to their plans to establish or expand their mosques reported that the situation in their respective cities had improved. The Islamic Centre in Hradec Kralove was completed, but the community in Brno dropped the idea of a second mosque there for financial reasons. Several internet websites continued to oppose in general the opening of new mosques.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy engaged the government on religious freedom and conducted outreach to religious leaders in the Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim communities.

Embassy officials encouraged government officials and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims. The embassy continued to emphasize the importance of restitution or fair and adequate compensation, when return was no longer possible in pending cases regarding property wrongfully taken from Holocaust victims, the Jewish community, and churches. Embassy staff participated in meetings on restitution matters with representatives from the MOC, the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches, and the Federation of Jewish Communities. Embassy officials responded to individual requests for assistance from U.S. citizen Holocaust victims seeking compensation for property seized in the past.

The U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues and embassy officials met with officials of the Prague-based ESLI and representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to monitor progress in fields specified in the Terezin Declaration. The Declaration appealed to governments, including the Czech Republic, to address problems relating to the welfare of Holocaust survivors, confiscated real estate, looted art, Judaica, and Holocaust education and remembrance. The U.S. Department of State continued to fund and support ESLI's activities.

The embassy sponsored five interfaith dialogues throughout the country. The second phase of last year's embassy-funded project on minorities, especially Muslims, was implemented in 15 towns and cities around the Czech Republic. Screenings of a documentary on the lives of Muslim converts were followed by discussions, mostly with young audiences.